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FM AMCONSUL CHENNAI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1741

INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3180

RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000234

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PTER ASEC IN

SUBJECT: MAOIST AMBUSH OF ELITE UNIT STRIKES A BLOW TO
COUNTER-INSURGENCY EFFORTS

REF: A) KOLKATA 193 B) CHENNAI 110

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Maoist (also known as Naxalite) rebels ambushed an elite Indian police unit in the eastern state Orissa, striking a major blow to the India's counter-insurgency effort. Thirty-two members of the Andhra Pradesh-based "Greyhounds" unit, which was conducting joint operations with police in neighboring Orissa, are still missing and presumed dead in the unit's worst-ever single encounter. Media and police contacts said that complacency on the part of the Greyhounds left the unit vulnerable to the sophisticated Maoist ambush. End summary.

Maoists ambush Greyhounds in Orissa

¶2. (U) One June 29 Maoists ambushed the Andhra Pradesh-based Greyhounds as they were traveling on a boat on the Balimela reservoir in Orissa's Malkangiri district (ref A). Andhra Pradesh police officials told post that the boat was carrying 63 passengers (55 Greyhound police commandoes, 6 policeman from Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, and 2 civilians) when it was ambushed while returning from a June 25 joint operation in Chitrakonda, Orissa close to the Andhra Pradesh border. A senior police officer from nearby Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh said the Maoists attacked with automatic weapons and grenades and the boat capsized when the police on board tried to counter the Maoists. He added that the authorities have accounted for 27 of the 63 on board, with 26 having safely returned and one person confirmed dead. The police official told us that 36 people are unaccounted for (including 32 Greyhounds) and that the chances any survived the attack and subsequent capsizing are "slim."

Greyhounds worst-ever single encounter

¶3. (SBU) The Greyhounds have successfully pursued and killed Maoists in Andhra Pradesh while suffering few casualties of their own. Speaking as though he assumed that all 32 of the missing Greyhounds were dead, Andhra Pradesh Additional Director General of Police (Intelligence) Aravinda Rao said that the June 29 attack in Orissa was the worst-ever loss of life for the Greyhounds in a single encounter. In fact, a former Greyhound chief told post that prior to the June 29 attack the unit had suffered only 22 fatalities in the line of duty in the preceding 19 years.

Greyhounds got complacent

¶4. (SBU) The media quickly raised the question of how a well-trained counter-insurgency unit could get caught in an ambush of this sort. The contacts we surveyed all agreed that complacency on the part of the Greyhounds was a major factor. A police official from nearby Visakhapatnam said the Greyhounds had overlooked the possibility that the Maoists could bring more firepower to bear

against them than the homemade "country weapons" (crude guns and bombs) often carried by Maoist cadres, despite the fact that the insurgents had seized heavy weapons in their February 2008 attack on a police station in Nayagarh, Orissa. A media contact told us the Greyhounds should not have traveled by boat during the day: "crossing a water body in broad daylight" put them in an "extremely vulnerable" position, he said. ADGP Aravinda Rao pointed to a number of failings on the part of the Greyhounds, including their lack of familiarity with the terrain they were covering, the "tactical mistake" of making a water crossing in only one boat, and exposing themselves to the possibility of betrayal by civilian guides. "It certainly was laxity on their part that proved fatal," according to Rao.

Comment: A major setback for India's Anti-Maoist Efforts

15. (SBU) Comment: Although human rights advocates have criticized the unit for its regular use of faked "encounter killings" of Maoists, there is a general consensus that the Greyhounds' approach has been one of the more effective anti-Maoist efforts in India. With Maoist violence against police and civilians in Andhra Pradesh steadily declining, the Greyhounds went on offense against the insurgents' operations in neighboring states, as demonstrated by the successful March 2008 operation in Chhattisgarh. But the Greyhounds became complacent. At the same time, the Maoists enhanced their capabilities -- increasing their firepower and, according to media reports, learning to intercept the Greyhound's radio communications.

The June 29 ambush is a significant step beyond previous Maoist attacks on poorly staffed regular police outposts in Chhattisgarh and Orissa. The Maoists recognize the threat elite units like the

CHENNAI 00000234 002 OF 002

Greyhounds pose to their movement and, more troublingly, they have the ability to execute coordinated strikes against one of the best counter-insurgency forces India has to offer. End comment.

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